

ITINERARY: MOROCCO 2006

Sunday October 22nd

Mid-afternoon flight from London Gatwick to Agadir, arriving early evening. Minibus transfer to Hotel Anezi

Monday October 23rd

Morning walk at Agadir Kasbah. Brief stop at hotel, then late morning birding at Aourir before lunch and afternoon birding at Tamri.

Tuesday October 24th

Whole day visit to Oued Massa, with a short stop along the road east of Massa before walking from the reserve entrance to the sea. Lunch in picnic area at the reserve entrance. Afternoon birdwatching from the bridge near Massa village.

Wednesday October 25th

Journey south to Guelmim with a stop in the Anti-atlas Mountains. Lunch and afternoon desert birding in and around Asrir village south-east of Guelmim. Late afternoon drive to Sidi Ifni.

Thursday October 26th

Early morning seawatching at Sidi Ifni then drive to Guelmim area. Morning and early afternoon desert birding at various sites along the Guelmim-Tan Tan road. Mid-afternoon drive back to Agadir.

Friday October 27th

Morning/early afternoon birding at various sites in the mountains en route to/from Immouzzar, including lunch in Paradise Valley. Late afternoon/dusk birding at Oued Sous.

Saturday October 28th

Whole day visit to Oued Massa area. Morning birding at an irrigation canal and the Barrage Youssef-ben-Tachfine viewpoint. Lunch and early afternoon birding near the bridge south-west of Café de la Poste towards the south-east end of Massa village. Mid-afternoon walk along the river section from the overlook to the reserve entrance.

Sunday October 29th

Morning birding and lunch at Oued Sous. Break at hotel then minibus transfer to airport for evening flight to London Gatwick.

DAILY DIARY: MOROCCO 2006

Sunday October 22nd

The 3.00 pm flight from Gatwick with MyTravel was on time so that we disembarked at Agadir at 5.46 pm local time and were gathered in the bar by 8.00 pm before enjoying the first of the excellent buffet dinners. Some then strolled on the sands, whilst others were pleased to sleep.

Monday October 23rd

Early birding round the hotel brought the first 'What's that noise?' Bulbuls, as well as Chiffchaff and Reed Warbler before we set off for the Kasbah at 8.15.

The top of the Kasbah already held salesmen and a number of camels. The latter contribute greatly to the area by providing waste to encourage insects to breed. Consequently, in a good light with no wind or sun, spectacular views were had of Southern Grey Shrike, Black Wheatear, Thekla Lark, Moussier's Redstart, Common Redstart, Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Spectacled Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Wryneck and Laughing Dove. Painted Ladies, of the right kind, and Dung Beetles were everywhere.

As we strolled down the hill, Serin and Sardinian Warbler appeared before, typically as it turned out for the week, raptors delighted us. A Long-legged Buzzard soared over the hills joined by a cruising Barbary Falcon. An Osprey breakfasted on top of a pylon whilst a sinister looking Peregrine surveyed Agadir from the top of the Kasbah. As the first bead of sweat trickled down a male brow and before any female perspiration was perceptible, Ibrahim and Rashid reappeared with the buses and the fish, bread, tomatoes, water, fruit and paraphernalia needed for quality picnic lunches. After a pit stop at the Anezi, we headed for Aourir and its dusty football pitches. Unfortunately no Bald Ibis were about when we got there, but offshore were the first of many Gannets and Cory's Shearwaters. Suddenly 13 Bald Ibis flew towards us from the south and, like us, headed for Tamri. Follow that flock! We did, and arrived at Tamri to find 82 more feeding Ibis which were joined by our fellow travellers for several hours of eating, bathing, preening and posing. Cattle Egrets fed amongst the Ibis obviously finding them a substitute for their usual insect stirrers.

The lagoon held the expected three gull species, including the much anticipated Audouin's, as well as Sandwich and Royal Terns, 10 Ruddy Shelduck, Spoonbill, Kingfisher, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Little Grebe and various waders. All were perturbed by a marauding Arctic Skua. A Lanner soared above the southern hills. A Lesser Emperor showed its blue saddle well.

In the bushes, we found Willow and Fan-tailed Warblers whilst many Yellow Wagtails 'tseeped' around us. A Black-crowned Tchagra showed marvellously for some time before two distant perched Golden Eagles were studied at x60. The Bald Ibis, meantime, sat preening on roadside ledges, oblivious to traffic and people, permitting high quality images to be captured by those that wished.

More of the already seen seabirds were noted as we travelled south with the need to return well before sunset as Ramadan was about to finish.

Tuesday October 24th

Soon after 8.00 we were heading for Massa some 35 miles south of Agadir with its mixed habitat of river, smallholdings and semi-desert. The Bank Holiday meant that Inezgane and other places were strangely quiet and we were scanning the fields just outside the long village by 9.00. Northern Wheatear, Southern Grey Shrike and some unobliging Lesser Short-toed Larks were noted.

Stopping on the cliff road approaching the reserve entrance, we soon thrilled to flights of 21 Black-winged Stilts and 70 Glossy Ibis. A party of 32 Little Grebe seemed incongruous. Cetti's Warbler sang, and a Sparrowhawk hunted before a Squacco perched white before flying brown. Five Black Terns bounced around feeding before we moved on to the reserve, stopping for a rangy Eleonora's Falcon and a Pied Flycatcher.

From the pedestrian entrance, scanning produced reasonable numbers of Greater Flamingo and poor views of Marbled Duck with other ducks and waders. Inevitably an Osprey fished.

Walking towards the sea we were delighted to see Wild Boar of all sizes and took pleasure in David's delight on finding a rare, for Morocco, Grey-headed Gull which seldom strays north of the Banc d'Arguin in Mauretania. Five Barbary Partridges were flushed, and unseen singing Tchagra were simply enjoyed as we had already had wonderful views of this species.

Closer sightings of waders such as Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Kentish Plover etc. were had as we neared the concrete shelter from where much improved images of Marbled Duck were enjoyed, whilst those that strode on towards the breakers were rewarded with the finding of lizards, Lang's Short-tailed Blue and False Mallow Skipper.

The stroll back for lunch seemed gentle because of the breeze and the reasonable temperature.

A Little Owl in the Eucalyptus and more views for everyone of the Eleonora's Falcon preceded our move to the nearer of the bridges across the river. We held the bridge for a couple of hours where we were much observed by locals and needed Ibrahim to sort out the children at one stage. Violet Dropwing and Sahara Bluetail were the exciting expected dragonflies and Speckled Wood, of the local race, was well photographed. A flying Purple Heron brought murmurs of pleasure and Brown-throated Sand Martins gave good views before the anticipated Black-shouldered Kite hovered nearby. Fan-tailed and Cetti's Warblers were admired, and the Grey-headed Gull was seen again overhead before, as we headed for the buses, two Kestrels were heard and found to be attacking a low, and perfectly lit, juvenile Bonelli's Eagle. Magic!

Tea was taken in the village with many of the elders - all men of course - watching cartoons on the café television.

Wednesday October 25th

The day dawned fine in Agadir as some enjoyed the continuing seabird spectacular, including a close Balearic Shearwater, from their balconies, but some distant thick black clouds gave warning of things to come. Garden Warblers showed well in the garden.

Leaving at 8.13, we stopped only for comfort before seeking Rock Bunting at our usual lay-by some 25 miles north of Guelmim. Birds were elusive in a cool wind with drizzle but Pied Flycatcher, Chaffinch and Rock Bunting were found. Dropping on to

the plain the weather improved and a Long-legged Buzzard was admired as it relaxed on a pylon.

Passing through Guelmim, we entered Asrir and were instantly rewarded with stonking views of a White-crowned Black Wheatear before a Lanner passed through keen to snatch one of many feral pigeons. House Bunting and Black-shouldered Kite gave brief sightings.

Moving round the corner, we took lunch by the roadside by a Prickly Pear Orchard and several Fulvous Babblers were lured out to inspect us from close range. Laughing Dove, Greenfinch and Spanish Sparrow were noted before the same (?) Lanner was joined by a Sparrowhawk.

Some 30 Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew by before we began to 'work' the usual desert area about half a mile beyond the orchard. Two Bar-tailed Desert Larks called and ran showing well as rain caused a small retreat to the van from which the shelterers enjoyed the first of many Red-rumped Wheatear. Thick-billed Larks looked good in flight and even more impressive on the ground and three Sandgrouse were watched feeding for some time, enabling those summoned from the buses to watch them.

The whole party was in mid desert when the wind picked up and rain lashed down soaking everyone and flooding the desert. Apparently there was much celebration, especially in Agadir, because of the amount of rain that fell over the wet period, but we were simply glad to reach the buses and head for Sidi Ifni. The Hotel Belle Vue was very welcoming and hot showers were taken in the quickly provided rooms. Clothes sharing helped some before tea, coffee or Martini was followed by a splendid supper of Moroccan Soup, white fish on the bone with chips and fruit salad accompanied by four bottles of, perhaps, the finest wine ever drunk in Sidi Ifni making the three of the local brew seem slightly inferior. Beer and/or a town walk followed but the night was disturbed by more noisy, torrential rain.

Thursday October 26th

Seawatching from the promenade next to the hotel was exactly that as red sediment poured into the sea from the wadi with the colouring drifting south as Cory's Shearwaters and Gannets, many close inshore, flew mainly south as the rain stopped. Arctic Skuas harried Sandwich Terns and a Common Scoter showed to some. Cormorants flew in to feed.

Leaving at 8.00, with some equipment out of action, we headed back to Asrir with a definite target in mind. After some effort, a singing Desert Lark was found by the roadside and enjoyed by all before it flew off with its partner.

Hot bread was found in Guelmim and some pleasant shopping done before we headed south towards Tan Tan. Just before an expected stop, sharp eyes saw movement in the desert and soon 25 Cream-coloured Coursers, some in flight, and several Hoopoe Larks showed splendidly to everyone. Unfortunately as the wind picked up about 300 motor cycles passed us causing the two Temminck's Horned Lark to take to the air never to be seen again. Red-rumped Wheatears again showed well but it took some time before Desert Wheatear gave good views to all.

Fan-tailed Gerbils provided much amusement before close sightings of perched and flying Long-legged Buzzard, a feeding roadside Lanner and a lively Tawny Pipit ended the pre-lunch period.

Southern Grey Shrikes of the *elegans* race showed well, whilst all saw Bar-tailed Desert Lark and flying Hoopoe Lark before we zipped into Guelmim for tiffin in preparation for the long journey back to Agadir.

In spite of the weather the desert birds had shown well but the two day dragonfly score was zero.

Friday October 27th

Rain water was still decorating the floor of the overspill dining room as we breakfasted, but the roofing man won't be called because it may not rain hard again for years!

At 8.30, we drove towards Immouzer via Aourir. Most stops were for photography as we travelled the slightly hair-raising road through this beautiful part of the Atlas Mountains. By a little after 10.00 we had reached the intended Pylon/Pine Car Park. Immediately a Cirl Bunting sang, rattled really, and was coaxed to perform at the top of a leafless tree - unusual for this species, especially in October. Chaffinches were about but some 'chipping' led to Crossbills appearing with the red male joined by a grey female. They were joined on wires and a pylon by the Cirl Bunting.

The search for Tristram's Warbler then began, with Sardinian Warblers the main annoyance before they led us to a tail cocking Tristram's which gave splendid views to most.

Dropping down the mountain road we made more scenic stops noting Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and House Bunting before lunch was taken near some camping French surfers and with two interested Portuguese by the side of the river in Paradise Valley.

A Barbary Falcon caused the local Crag Martins to get together as David showed Emperor, Ringed Cascader, Epaulet Skimmer, Orange-winged and Red-veined Dropwings to those interested.

A stroll produced Grey Wagtail, Peregrine with a Barbary Falcon and two adult Bonelli's Eagles. Stripe-necked Terrapins basked and Barbary Ground Squirrels skipped but an amphibian remained unidentified. A single Wood Pigeon was noted on the return drive.

A short break then gave us the energy to enjoy Oued Sous. Parking at the barrier we decided to stand and watch from a chosen position on the flat sand - a sort of sea watch only on the river. Initially there was disappointment not dissipated by the sight of 20 Wood Pigeons, but a determined effort in tricky light and a stiff breeze brought stimulating results. Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit and Oystercatcher were new waders. Arctic Skuas appeared as did Marsh Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard and

Osprey, as well as Sandwich, Black, Common, Lesser Crested and Gull-billed Terns flying by whilst a Mediterranean Gull performed well.

As darkness neared we lured a Red-necked Nightjar to fly round us, scared off threatening dogs, interested two Long-eared Owls in our activities and enjoyed the wailing of the local Stone Curlew that live on the King's Golf Course inside the Palace walls.

A wonderfully varied day!

Saturday October 28th

Just after 8.00 we headed for Barrage Youssef and Massa. At Sidi Bibi we pulled into a parade of workshops as a Little Swift had been spotted. A Sparrowhawk tried to spoil the fun by making a pass, but about 20 birds returned very soon and began to visit their nests which were in two working bays. Photographs were essential and the mechanic enjoyed sweets and 10 Dirhams.

Soon after 10.00 we reached a favoured spot on the road to the dam and revelled in flocks of bubbling Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying over us. Alpine Swifts appeared and Southern Grey Shrike were everywhere. We reached the dam which is about 50 miles from Agadir and went to the observation point. Some took mint tea prepared by Grandpa whilst others were joined in bird hunting by Grandson. A Short-toed Eagle dangled its legs and hovered, a Marsh Harrier sat in a bush and an Osprey on a post was shown to many French tourists on 'Safari'. Small birds proved elusive with Rock Sparrow the one that probably got away after calling. Black Wheatears were more obliging. A local was keen to show us an extremely large beetle.

After 11.00 we turned our attention to the track just south of the closed Café de la Poste in Massa. Our good luck continued as a seemingly fruitless detour produced close views of a young Tawny Eagle as we were finding few passerines except Stonechat. Clouded Yellow, Small White and African Grass Blue were on some flowering Lucerne and were joined by one of the long billed race of Crested Lark. Goblet-marked Damselfly was found before lunch which was interrupted when a dark phase Booted Eagle - our fifteenth raptor species - appeared.

Whinchat was noted as we gave gifts to the locals before we returned to the cliffs on the river bend near the reserve entrance. Today over 50 Little Grebes were in a feeding frenzy and a Purple Heron looked splendidly colourful and yet sinister as it perched in full view. Ferruginous Ducks and some Gadwall made difficult appearances with Bonelli's Eagle, Barbary Falcon and Squacco Heron all not showing quite as well as we would have liked. Fan-tailed Warblers were everywhere and we enjoyed our last sightings on the Massa of such as Flamingo, Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Glossy Ibis.....

Tea was again taken in Massa but this time the local men were watching football not cartoons.

Sunday October 29th

A gentle departure at 8.30 took us to Oued Sous for the morning. The top end was dry probably because of the combination of the long dry spell and the new sewerage

system. This meant that birds such as White Stork and Little Ringed Plover which were once regular here were nowhere to be seen. Further down, a juvenile Curlew Sandpiper caught the eye along with numerous Godwits - Black and Bar-tailed, Stilts, Grey Plover, Flamingos, Redshanks, Common Sandpiper, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Spoonbill, Black, Common and Sandwich Terns. Two Meadow Pipits called as they flew over us.

Passerines were in evidence as we walked towards the sea with Blue Tit, Sardinian Warbler, Stonechat and Moussier's Redstart showing well. Northern Wheatear were in evidence on the marsh scrub with Tchagra barking and sitting up in view. Approaching the loafing flock near the sand bar two Slender-billed Gulls were seen swimming and a Lesser Crested Tern preened busily.

Back at the King's Pool, Serin and Goldfinch drank as a Moroccan White Wagtail fed with a splendid male Spanish Sparrow nearby. Lunch was taken here including the last taste of the admirable local bananas and oranges. We returned to the hotel to swim and/or shower little knowing that a technical problem on the aircraft and inefficiency at Gatwick was to prolong our journey by several hours.