

## **ITINERARY**

### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> February**

Afternoon flight from London Heathrow to Tunis, arriving mid-evening. Onward transfer to Hotel Mediterranee in Hammamet.

### **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February**

Morning birdwatching at Korba and Lebna Lakes on the Cap Bon peninsula and at Lake Jedidi south of Hammamet (picnic lunch). Afternoon drive south, via the Roman amphitheatre at El Jem, to Hotel Tamaris in Mahres for a three night stay.

### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February**

Optional pre-breakfast birding near hotel. Morning birdwatching at Thyna (salt pans/coast) and Mahres (coast north of hotel). Lunch in Hotel Tamaris. Afternoon birdwatching at Mahres harbour and the coastal area around Kheneiss.

### **Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> February**

Optional pre-breakfast birding near hotel. Whole day visit to Bou Hedma National Park (picnic lunch).

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> February**

Morning drive south to Matmata for coffee and visit to troglodyte dwellings. Onward journey west towards Douz, making four stops in the desert including one for picnic lunch. Afternoon circuit drive around the desert oases west of Douz, stopping at Pool A, Ghidma and Pool B then to Hotel Saharien in Douz for a two night stay.

### **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> February**

Whole day visit in 4WD vehicles to the desert south of Douz (Jebil National Park).

### **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> February**

Morning birding at Jemna oasis pool; coffee stop at Chott el Jerid; onward drive via El Mahassen with roadside birding to Tamerza for café lunch. Circuit drive to Selja Gorge for afternoon birding. Onward drive to Hotel Caravanserail in Nefta.

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> February**

Early morning flight to Tunis. Morning birding and sightseeing at Tunis Lakes and Carthage. Early afternoon flight to London Heathrow.

## **DAILY DIARY**

### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> February**

Our mid-afternoon flight from London Heathrow arrived at Tunis mid-evening. After the usual formalities, including a longer than expected delay at passport control, we met up with Tarek, exchanged money, and boarded our coach for the hour-long transfer to our modern hotel in Hammamet. Tarek issued the first of our information sheets, and this was to become a daily ritual. A welcome light supper was available on arrival and, soon afterwards, we were on our way to bed in quiet if distant (and rather cold) rooms after a long day.

## **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February**

Tarek and David set out after an early breakfast to buy the group's picnic. Everyone else awoke at a more leisurely pace but at our regular departure time of 8.30 am we headed north-east for the short journey to Lake Korba, a semi-saline lake adjacent to the north-east coast. Our first stop produced a perched Fan-tailed Warbler and our first Southern Grey Shrike as well as some distant waterbirds, whilst at our second we were thrilled to find a group of Stone Curlews right by the road. We then found a track crossing the lake down to the sea and enjoyed flight views of a number of Caspian Terns above the water as well as our first Kentish Plovers on the beach. A little further on, two roadside White Storks were very obliging – given the temperature they might have wished they had stayed further south!

At Lebna Dam our roadside vantage point proved to be a good vista and we found a number of Purple Gallinules on the edge of the reeds. Two Glossy Ibises were further bonuses whilst those scanning the reed fringes found two Reed Buntings.

Taking in a comfort break en route, we then drove south-west to the freshwater Lake Jedidi and immediately on arrival found our first White-headed Duck; this site is one of the best in North Africa for this rare species and it was really exciting to scan and find several more. We also found a drake Ferruginous Duck before settling down to enjoy our first picnic despite the cold weather. Afterwards we investigated a passerine flock and found a number of Serins as well as some genuine Spanish Sparrows. Unlike our previous stops, this one was truly rural and we enjoyed watching the locals tending their herds of goats.

Our long journey south occupied much of the afternoon and allowed most to sleep prior to our arrival at El Jem, where we had time for a leisurely walk around the impressive amphitheatre. David was somewhat baffled that he wasn't allowed to take in his telescope despite protests from Tarek that it really wasn't a camera! Then it was onwards for our last leg. One bit of road was under construction and one car in particular had failed to distinguish between the single and dual carriageway sections with disastrous consequences. We arrived just before 7 pm at Mahres and had time to settle into our rooms before our first dinner, which comprised several courses including 'brick' and fresh fish.

## **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February**

David and Roger spent a leisurely half hour studying the waders outside the hotel before breakfast with a Little Stint the highlight. Our main port of call this morning was Thyna salt pans, an extensive area a short drive north of Mahres. There were large flocks of waders comprising a variety of species, with Marsh Sandpiper the most noteworthy for UK birders. We also had fine views of Slender-billed Gulls. Almost inevitably the bus took in one muddy track too many and got stuck. Tarek appeared to have this under control – it was obviously a regular occurrence – so the rest of us went for a walk and achieved the best 'find' of the trip – three Red-necked Phalaropes spinning around amongst a group of flamingos. David texted a number of contacts in the UK and established that this species is a vagrant in Tunisia with just a handful of previous records.

The distant piles of salt made for impressive photographs before, with the bus back on the road, we made a second major stop on the shore nearby. The number of birds was even more impressive, with the count of Mediterranean Gulls the highlight. A third stop near Mahres seemed unlikely to produce much and so it proved, but we dutifully followed Tarek through the muddy sand to the coast and were shown a local boat called a *Lute*: we saw several others later.

After a solid and substantial lunch back at base, we drove round to the harbour where we found two Shags amongst the Cormorants on the wall, had proper looks at Mediterranean Gull and finally had good views of Black-necked Grebes offshore. A Kingfisher was enjoyed, as always. We took in a stop for stamps before heading south to the edge of Kheneiss nature reserve. On previous trips Tarek had boarded boats here and headed for some distant offshore islands. We decided not to do this – and having seen the boats felt we had made the correct decision! On the coast some of us had brief glimpses of calling Water Pipits, whilst we all saw the feeding Gull-billed Terns as well as the numerous roosting waders. We established that the tower was to look out for illegal cockling. The best birding was actually from the bus as we drove through the orchards, with fine views of Little Owl and Moussier's Redstart in particular. On the way back Tarek told us why the Olive trees were exactly twenty metres apart, before we fled the oncoming storm and headed back to the hotel for a relatively early finish at 5.50 pm, the light rain starting shortly after our arrival.

## **Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> February**

Today we drove inland – the journey to Bou Hedma National Park took a little over ninety minutes with a Raven the only bird of note on the journey. A Black Wheatear was spotted as we collected our permits but it was decided that, rather than keep stopping and starting, after a comfort break at the centre the best tactic would be to find a good piece of habitat and go for a walk. This proved very worthwhile. Birds included Desert Lark but our morning was marked by the mammals (Scimitar-billed Oryx, Addax and Dama Gazelle), butterflies (Green-striped White, Greenish Black-tip, Painted Lady and Small White), and the numerous flowers. There really was something for everyone here both to watch and photograph, all against the backdrop of some fine mountains.

A leisurely picnic lunch at the centre allowed some to wander around and find Common Bulbul, Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush and other relatively common species, but the birding highlight here was the line of House Buntings on the roof: very photogenic! For the afternoon we headed (literally) through a fence to a part of the park nearer the mountains. En route we stopped for an Ostrich – reintroduced, like some of the mammals, but memorable nevertheless – and found Dama Gazelle as a result. There were more birds here too, with a party of Crag Martins and two Lanner Falcons. Near the car park we noted our first Thekla Larks before quietly sitting and waiting for Gundi to appear from their holes. Success was immediate, so whilst those who wished to enjoy more prolonged views were able to wait near the holes, the rest of us headed along a path which proved productive in the form of Little Owl and Spectacled Warbler in particular. As we drove back from the hills a Long-legged Buzzard finally showed properly, on a pylon. We stopped for petrol at the centre (in cans that wouldn't pass Health and Safety guidelines here!) and were

baffled to have to show our passports at the entrance gate before we finally headed home at the end of a thoroughly enjoyable day with a great variety of wildlife on offer.

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> February**

We set off a little earlier than usual today (8 am) for the first part of our journey south. On the main road we were amazed to see all the petrol on sale in cans by the roadside – apparently it was cheap fuel from Libya on sale on the black market. A coffee stop at Matmata was very welcome, and just outside the village we were given a fascinating guided tour of an ancient troglodyte dwelling. Our first birding stop was 26 km west of Matmata – a pair of first-year Mourning Wheatears gave superb views, before those who walked into a shallow wadi found our first Desert Wheatear; back by the road two Lesser Short-toed Larks were seen briefly. A second stop at a patch of sandy desert proved birdless, but we were more fortunate at our lunch stop 12 km east of Douz. We found at least two species of gerbil, one of which was tentatively identified as Fat-tailed, our first Bar-tailed Desert Larks and several Vagrant Emperor dragonflies.

Travelling west of Douz in the early afternoon, we set off on what proved to be a rather longer than expected circular drive via various pools. At our first stop, which the previous trips reports called Pool A, we quickly located our first Marbled Teals as well as a Green Sandpiper. At Ghidma we found some Black-winged Stilts whilst at dusk fell, Pool B produced as well as an elusive Scrub Warbler in the nearby bushes. At all three places there were plenty of our waders and ducks as well as potential for passerines nearby, and rather than drive round we would have been better exploring one or two of them more fully.

We were pleased to arrive at the hotel just before a large coachload of tourists and were soon enjoying dinner before an early night in preparation for the excitement of our journey into the desert.

### **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> February**

Today was ‘desert day’ – and we set off at 8 am in two four wheel drive vehicles for our journey into the edge of the Sahara. We were soon ‘off road’ and into sandy desert with low bushes. Very soon we spotted our first Hoopoe Lark and had stunning views of it both perched and song-flighting. Others could be heard singing in the distance, and the song was heard on and off throughout the day. A little further on, we were in luck again with a small group of Cream-coloured Coursers close to the track – although the light wasn’t great, the views were very acceptable and it was super to have seen some so early in the day. We found Long-legged Buzzard and Desert Wheatear by the track but there was little else of note during the first leg of the journey and we were pleased to stop at a café (36 km from the hotel) for a welcome drink.

We headed south-west into ever sandier terrain and it was birdless! Nevertheless we decided to stop and have a walk for half an hour or so. There was nothing to see except tracks in the sand, but what staggered us all was the silence on such a

beautifully still day. We continued on to a somewhat bizarre checkpoint (19 km from the café) where we had to pick up permits for the National Park. Tarek did the necessary and we kept our eyes open – passerines were spotted in the straw on top of a shelter and we were glad we checked them out: a pair of Desert Sparrows! Many of the group got fine 'scope views before the birds suddenly flew off into the distance never to return. Although we were fully expecting to see them later in the day, this was a real surprise: this was the 'must-see' bird today!

Soon after we spotted our first Brown-necked Ravens, sitting on the backs of Camels! Tarek's driver then put on the afterburners and the first vehicle disappeared, but when those in the second one found a small bird flying across into a nearby bush our thoughts were on the bird and not the missing vehicle. Five long minutes passed before David located what was presumably the same bird: it was a male Desert Warbler. We had fabulous views in good light and it stayed long enough for everyone, including those in Tarek's returning vehicle, to see it superbly.

Elated, we headed on – by the first 'gate' (12 km beyond the permit building) birds were attracted to the grain put out for the chickens and we found several Bar-tailed Desert Larks and had a glimpse of our first Temminck's Horned Lark. We were also pleased to see some Rhim Gazelles nearby. It was a further 11 km via the second 'gate' to our lunch spot by a water container. Here we had excellent views of Short-toed Lark, several Brown-necked Ravens and a Tristram's Warbler.

We attempted to reach our final destination, the original Desert Sparrow site, but suffice to say that we never made it. After an hour or so of trying David insisted that it was time to return (getting stuck in the Sahara didn't seem a good plan) and reluctantly we headed back. We had fantastic views of Cream-coloured Coursers and Temminck's Horned Larks in good light between the two gates, quickly established humans had replaced Desert Sparrows in their first spot then drove back to the hotel. Including just a couple of stops it took about three hours to drive back (78 km) and we arrived at 6.40 pm. It had been every bit as good as expected despite not quite getting to the end!

### **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> February**

Our first port of call was Douz town centre where David's recce the night before proved fruitless when the teapots he had located (as requested) were found to be antique rather than usable! Nothing ventured, nothing gained and we headed north to a lake near Jemna. The prospects didn't look good given the amount of rubbish lying around, but we soon found waders including a Temminck's Stint (into the sun) and a Wood Sandpiper (in good light). We were delighted finally to find several Ruddy Shelducks too and met with the local warden.

We continued on our journey and started to cross the vast expanse of Chott el Jerid, the largest of several salt lakes where we also had our morning coffee stop. There was a chance to haggle and purchase a Desert Rose or two! It was difficult to see where the lake stopped and the horizon began. As we finally hit the other side and a couple of villages we immediately found ourselves in White-crowned Black Wheatear habitat and soon spotted our first pair. Amazingly we found about twenty more during the day. Several Mourning Wheatears and a small party of Cream-coloured

Couriers were also located close to the road. The terrain returned to saltflats before we hit a spectacular range of mountains. A photo stop produced a Blue Rock Thrush and a Gundi before we headed on to our lunch stop in Tamerza. David was invited to play table football with some local children while we waited for a local starter and a choice of 'kebab' and (inevitably!) couscous.

The onward drive was irritatingly longer than expected, although the landscape was interesting (including some phosphate mines). Eventually we arrived at Selja Gorge and it was agreed we would spend the rest of the day there. The scenery was interesting although the high water level meant we couldn't get far up the gorge. The birds were mainly ones we'd seen already but a group of Trumpeter Finches were relatively confiding. We finished off by walking across a piece of desert habitat with the sun behind us – but try as we might we couldn't find anything new. Our journey to Tozeur and Nefta was much as expected and we found our hotel to be plush! David and Stephen joined Tarek for an interview with Tunisia radio prior to our final dinner together. Tarek had organised something special for us but actually many preferred the fine buffet on offer. We were sorry to have to retire early in preparation for our 4 am start.

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> February**

Somewhat surprisingly, many of the group tucked into breakfast at 4 am prior to our 4.30 transfer and 5 am check in. Our short flight from Tozeur to Tunis took less than an hour and, after a welcome coffee at the airport, we boarded our bus for a short tour of some local lakes (and typical birds) en route to Carthage. Tarek gave us a really splendid guided tour of three outdoor sites and a museum. Aside from taking photos and listening to our talks we were able to find a couple of new birds (North African Blue Tit and Blackcap) and enjoy better views of others (North African Chaffinch and Sardinian Warbler). This famous cultural site was truly memorable and made our early start to the day really worthwhile. Eventually we had to return to the airport where we set goodbye to Tarek prior to a smooth check in and trouble free flight home. We had driven long distances and unpacked several times, but the birds, animals, flowers, scenery, people watching and cultural sites had combined to make this a trip to remember for many different reasons. Despite his incapacity for the last 24 hours or so and much of the following week, the leader, for one, would like to return!