

Birding with Mohamed Bargache in and around Agadir and the Desert

March 17th to 20th, 2014

Day One – 17th March (Oued Souss, Oued Massa and National Park of Souss-Massa)

Mohamed met me bang on time at my Agadir hotel (Appart Hotel Taradirt – not one of the best in the area, but very cheap at Euro 174 for six nights including a sparse breakfast!). We headed straight for the estuary of the Oued Souss which is only 10 minutes from the centre of Agadir. A nice start to the day, with an **Osprey** and a large flock of **Flamingos**, one **Spoonbill** and a passing **Alpine Swift**. Gulls were present in small numbers but with the telescope we were able to make out a few **Slender-billed Gulls**, one **Little Gull**, two **Audouin's Gull**, one **Sandwich Tern** as well as the more usual suspects. There is a small marsh area hidden across the salt scrub adjacent to the Royal Palace – Mohamed warned me that the military guards sometimes move birders away from the marsh - and he was constantly on the lookout for them. In the event they left us alone and we had enough time there to tick off good numbers of **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Avocet**, **Snipe**, **Redshank** and **Grey Plover** and **Black-winged Stilt**. One **Curlew Sandpiper** was identified in amongst the usual “peeps”. The marsh scrub held a few **Zitting Cisticolas** and a **Southern Grey Shrike** was evident, but it was nice to have a real close-up look at three **Stone Curlews**.

We then headed to the National Park of Souss-Massa, stopping off at a small patch of stony high ground above the Reserve, where Mohamed located my first of many **Cream-coloured Coursers**. Besides the usual larks Mohamed was surprised to find a **Bar-tailed Lark**, more usually found in the desert regions. We then ventured into the Reserve by way of the back entrance to access the lagoon, which he explained saved a lot of walking. On the way a **Little Owl** was spotted close to the village of Sidi-Rbat, as well as a further three **Stone Curlews**. In the gentle walk to the lagoon observation platform (actually a disused engine room for the former salt works) revealed a good view of **Black-crowned Tchagra**, **Subalpine Warbler**, **Moussier's Redstart** and a few noisy **Sardinian Warblers**. The lagoon itself was rather devoid of birds, but at the sand bar end amongst the gulls was a **Caspian Gull**, **Kentish Plover** and a small group of **Sandwich Terns**.



Figure 1 Black-crowned Tchagra, Subalpine Warbler and Moussier's Redstart

After lunch in Massa town, we headed off in search of the **Northern Bald Ibis** (a bird that I much want to see as it's "critically endangered" with possibly no more than 250 mature adult birds left and most of those confined to SE Morocco¹). We headed to a really sparsely vegetated area along the shore about 10kms miles south of Massa, with burning hot sun and not a lot of wind. We went "off piste" along a sandy track (we had already covered about 5 miles on similar tracks) when we got well and truly stuck in the sand.... We tried to dig ourselves out with our hands, and then tried jacking up the car, putting stones under the tyres. This exercise was repeated two more times. But all we managed after about an hour, was to shift it all of ten feet! My hands and arm were knackered from digging... so I asked Mohamed to phone for help. Thank Goodness he'd got phone reception and called his brother who is a guard at the Reserve – it was his day off.

After waiting for about an hour for help, along came Mohamed's brother and a mate on a motorbike!! My immediate reaction was that this wasn't going to help much, but they all set to work. While they were working Mohamed spotted two **Northern Bald Ibis** in the distance. A short while later another five passed right over us!!!!



Figure 2 - Well and truly stuck! ... and two Northern Bald Ibis

Sensibly the brother let down the tyre pressure, jacked up the car, put stones underneath, and then Mohamed added some plastic wrapping just lying there in the desert! We put that under, started the car up and we all pushed for all we were worth. To our relief, he got going and it was driven on to terra firma.

We returned to the same area (but not the same track!) the next day, just to check for more **Northern Bald Ibis** and found 50 individuals resting close to the sea shore.

Day Two – 18th March (Oued Massa, and drive to Guelmim)

Mohamed suggested that we re-visit the stony patch of ground first thing in the morning as this was a good time to see **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**, and sure enough we did – five of them. We again encountered the Coursers as well as **Common Quail**, **Black-eared Wheatear**, and one **Lesser Short-toed Lark** amongst the many **Short-toed and Crested Larks**.

¹ See BirdLife Int. <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=3791>



Figure 3 - Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, and Trumpeter Finch

We then headed down to the farmland which runs alongside the Oued Massa, when we spent a very pleasant hour walking along the water course. Notable birds included **Cirl Bunting**, **Spanish Sparrow**, **Cetti's Warbler**, the North African race of **Yellow Wagtail (*iberiae*)** and **European Bee-eater**. In addition we encountered **Kingfisher**, **Sedge and Reed Warblers**, and four species of Hirundinidae.

After lunch, we set off on our four hour (230kms) drive via the coast road to Guelmim, down to the desert region of the Anti-Atlas. Mohamed undertook this long tedious drive which was largely uneventful but wonderful scenery. The occasional **Black Wheatear** was seen by the road. We reached our night's lodgings, a very basic "auberge" some 40 kms south of Guelmim, just about 5.30pm. There was still some light, so I decided to go birding by myself as Mohamed was exhausted. The gentle stroll around the oasis yielded **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Red-rumped Wheatear**, **Thekla Lark**, **Trumpeter Finch** (a nice male and two females) and a pair of **Thick-billed Larks**.

Accommodation at the farm house/auberge was very basic, with few creature comforts and no sheets on the bed! But supper of local Moroccan chicken and home baked bread was delicious.



Figure 4- The desert "Auberge" accommodation and foggy view in the early morning

Day Three 19th March (Desert region south of Guelmim and Massa Bridge)

Early the next morning was shrouded in a thick sea mist, which cleared rapidly as the sun rose. We set off for a further 12kms south and arrived in a surprisingly green "desert" area. This "green" did not extend far beyond the road side. Apparently there had been unusually rainy during the winter and local farmers had taken advantage to sow wheat in what would normally have been truly desert. The crops were just beginning to sprout. However, everywhere else the land was thin scrub or barren. We stopped off at what appeared to be a barren stony field, but as we traversed it, we

encountered “clouds” of larks. Mohamed was able to point out **Desert, Short-toed, Lesser Short-toed, Thekla, Thick-billed** and the very large **Hoopoe Larks**, with their distinctive call. In addition we found plenty of **Cream-coloured Coursers** both on the ground and flying high.

At another similar location just as we parked the car, we had a brief sighting of what Mohamed thought was a Pallid Harrier but, as this was classified as an “accidental” in the text books², I decided it was more likely to be a **Montague’s Harrier**, which use this area as a migration route. From this point we set off on a long walk round a stony hill, behind which we encountered a pair of **Temminck’s Horned Larks** grazing on short grass.



Figure 5 Where we found the Temminck's Horned Lark

At about 12.30 we started our five hour journey back to Agadir, stopping off at a very unprepossessing dry scrubby water course in the hills above Guelmim, which Mohamed assured me had on previous occasions yielded **Fulvous Babbler**, but we would have to walk quite a way uphill. To his surprise we spotted a nesting pair as soon as we reached the stream bed, and enjoyed wonderful views as they kept returning with food in their bills to one particular bush.

On the way back to Agadir, we stopped off at Massa for a very late lunch and then had another look at the Oued Massa from a low bridge. Here we encountered a few more new but common birds for the trip list, although not the Plain Martin which were known to breed close by. However the highlight of the stop was a **Great Spotted Cuckoo** crossing the river in full view.



Figure 6 - Oued Massa valley and Great Spotted Cuckoo

² A Birdwatchers Guide to Morocco by Patrick & Fedora Bergier published Prion Ltd 2003

Day Four – 20th March (Paradise Valley and Imouzzer)

The road up to Paradise valley and Imouzzer passes through some really spectacular gorges and stunning mountains. We decided to head straight up to the top, where there is a small Aleppo pine forest, located just a few hundred yards from the village. The walk through the forest yielded very little save a **Sparrowhawk**, one male **Crossbill** (although a number heard calling), one **Jay**, a **Coal tit** calling and the **African Blue Tit**. The Jay and Crossbill were “lifers” for Mohamed! However in the scrub above the treeline, we found a pair of **Tristram’s Warblers** showing very well.



Figure 7 - Tristram's Warbler and Paradise Valley

We spent most of the morning in the Aleppo pines, and then popped over the valley to see the cascades which yielded a **Blue Rock Thrush**. Nothing unusual was seen on the way back to Agadir, and other than a few **Kestrels**, no large raptors.

Overall a very pleasant four days birding with Mohamed who knows all the right places to go.



Figure 8 - Sunset in the desert

List of birds seen with Mohamed Bargache between 17th and 20th March 2014

Mallard	Common Wood Pigeon	Red-rumped Wheatear	
Tufted Duck	Eurasian Collared Dove	Black-eared Wheatear	
Barbary Partridge	Laughing Dove	Desert Wheatear	
Common Quail	Great Spotted Cuckoo	Spotless Starling	
Little Grebe	Little Owl	Ashy-headed Yellow-wagtail	
Greater Flamingo	Alpine Swift	Girl Bunting	
Eurasian White Stork	Pallid Swift	Rock Bunting	
North African Cormorant	Common Kingfisher	House Bunting	
Grey Heron	European Bee-eater	African Chaffinch	
Little Egret	Common Kestrel	Trumpeter Finch	
Cattle Egret	Black-crowned Tchagra [sp]	Red Crossbill	
Glossy Ibis	Southern Grey Shrike	European Goldfinch	
Northern Bald Ibis	Eurasian Jay	Common Linnet	
Eurasian Spoonbill	Eurasian Magpie	European Serin	
Osprey	Greater Hoopoe-lark	House Sparrow	
Eurasian Marsh Harrier	Bar-tailed Lark	Spanish Sparrow	
Montagu's Harrier	Desert Lark		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Thick-billed Lark		
Black Kite	Greater Short-toed Lark	Total Species	108
Eurasian Common Moorhen	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Lifers for REF	18
Common Coot	Crested Lark		
Eurasian Stone Curlew	Thekla Lark		
Black-winged Stilt	Temminck's Horned Lark		
Pied Avocet	Barn Swallow		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Red-rumped Swallow		
Grey Plover	Northern House Martin		
Kentish Plover	Coal Tit		
Ringed Plover	Great Tit		
Common Sandpiper	African Blue Tit		
Common Greenshank	Northern Wren		
Common Redshank	Common Bulbul		
Eurasian Curlew	Cetti's Warbler		
Black-tailed Godwit	Willow Warbler		
Curlew Sandpiper	Common Chiffchaff		
Dunlin	Sedge Warbler		
Common Snipe	Eurasian Reed Warbler		
Cream-coloured Courser	Zitting Cisticola		
Slender-billed Gull	Tristram's Warbler		
Black-headed Gull	Subalpine Warbler		
Little Gull	Fulvous Babbler		
Audouin's Gull	Moussier's Redstart		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Common Redstart		
Great Black-backed Gull	Blue Rock Thrush		
Caspian Tern	European Stonechat		
Sandwich Tern	Black Wheatear		
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Northern Wheatear		