

Morocco, 7-12 July 2012

Ian Reid and Steve MR Young



## **Introduction**

In spring of 2012, only a few months before emigrating to Australia, I started to think about a “final” Western Palearctic jaunt to use some frequent flyer miles that had accumulated over the previous year. Initially I considered a trip back to Poland, revisiting sites I had been to in May 2011, but my usual birding mates were either not interested or too busy and I thought the chance to get away for a final fling had passed as spring came and went. Late June I started to think again about possibilities: was there anywhere within about 3 hours flight (the limit of my cheap flight) that had availability, an array of quality birds (especially lifers), and which could yield decent birding in just a few days, in spite of the late time of year. First thought was Finland, but although doable, I had missed the spring window -- the chances of owls post-breeding were slim, distances vast, and it was pretty clear that a 4-5 day trip was simply not viable in July. Next thought was the other geographic extreme: Morocco for some desert birding. A report by Bonser *et al* from July 2010 seemed to suggest that quality birds could still be seen in July in spite of the intense heat at this time of year.

On 30<sup>th</sup> June SMR Young and family came up from Devon to stay with us overnight and over a few pints I seeded the idea, and after a few more he and I hatched a vague plan -- though at this point neither of us seriously thought that we'd find a mutually suitable set of dates. The day after they went back home I enumerated all 4 and 6-day trips on which I could get flights to/from Marrakech on BA reward flights, and after eliminating all dates with prior commitments, we were left with one possible window: 7-12 July. To my amazement, we both got the pass out from our respective families, and so only two days after cooking up a tentative plan, now we were booked on the last remaining reward seats, leaving in just 5 days' time.

Bonser *et al* had blazed a trail to Western Sahara, so although their list of birds was mouth-watering, the distances were too great for a couple of middle-aged blokes going almost as much for the craic as for the birding. Instead I devised a pretty standard itinerary that would take us over the Atlas mountains to the stony desert where we would look for larks and

wheatears and sandgrouse on the famous Tagdilt Track, and then even further afield to the very edge of the Erg Chebbi dune system where more of the same and some other specialty birds such as Egyptian Nightjar and Desert Sparrow were key targets.

### **References:**

Gosney: *Finding Birds in Morocco: The Deserts*, 2009. My copy was ordered direct from Dave at [www.easybirder.co.uk](http://www.easybirder.co.uk) and he despatched it first class post, arriving the next day. Awesome service!

Richard Bonser et al: *Morocco and Western Sahara 3-14 July 2010*. This was the report that made me think Morocco in summer might not be such a bad bet.  
[http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=1862](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1862)

Gruff Dodd: *Southern Morocco, 1 - 4 May 2010*  
<http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/morocco/morocco-26/s-morocco-may-2010.htm>. And this was the report that made me realize we could potentially see a lot in a short trip.

Mick Bell: *Birding in Morocco: High Atlas to the Sahara Desert, 28/3-2/4/2011*  
<http://www.birdtours.co.uk/pdf-area/Morocco%20Bird%20Report%202011.pdf>

Ian Merrill: *Morocco 2010: 22nd February to 1st March*,  
[http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=1793](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1793)

Birdforum: Morocco thread <http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=215962>, especially info from Alan Lewis and PMs from Dan Pointon

### **Logistics:**

**Flights:** BA reward flights, Gatwick to Marrakech, £27 each

**Car hire:** booked through carhire3000, basically brokers for lots of companies, whom I have used on numerous occasions in the past. This time the company on the ground was called "First" and provided a small but adequate 4-door Suzuki Celerio for £128 for the 4 days. We made sure the spare tyre and tools were intact and the aircon working before we set out.

**Weather:** July in Morocco is hot. F\*\*king hot. It was high 30s, low 40s during the heat of the day. Furthermore the birds are of course post-breeding and not nearly as vocal. Nevertheless we still managed to find most of our targets, with dawn being unsurprisingly the best time of day. We used the high heat of 11-4pm either for travel between sites, or chilling out by the pool (see below), but did in fact score some key species even in the heat of the day. Evenings (we had only three usable evenings) remained quiet and the two we had in the Rissani/Merzouga area blighted by wind and minor sandstorms.

**Itinerary:** We decided to concentrate on the deserts, and began with a tentative plan of driving from Marrakech to Boumalne (arriving very late) on 7<sup>th</sup>, all day birding in/near Boumalne 8<sup>th</sup>, dawn on 9<sup>th</sup> birding in Boumalne before moving further east to the Rissani/Merzouga/Erg Chebbi area for the next two days. However once on the ground we

realised that the drive from Marrakech to Boumalne is a lot longer than Google Maps reports (about 6 hours, not 4) because of the slow winding drive over the mountains. This makes Merzouga to Marrakech into a 10 hour killer, so we adjusted our itinerary to be: 8<sup>th</sup> in Boumalne, heading in the afternoon to Merzouga where we stayed for the nights of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> before driving back to Boumalne on 11<sup>th</sup> to bring Marrakech within striking distance. Had we been prepared for more driving on 11<sup>th</sup> we could have taken in the high Atlas at Oukameiden (key target would have been Crimson-winged Finch), but we decided instead to do less driving and spend more time at the Tagdilt Track. A harder-core group would poo-poo this, but I would make the same decision again.

**Accommodation:** hotels in Morocco can be obtained quite cheaply, though we decided to go a little more up-market and stayed in a couple of places with pools. I pre-booked our first night at Perle du Dades on booking.com, a very nice, friendly place about 7km south of Boumalne, a twin room at a cost of 70euros (35 each). We would have stayed here again on our final night but the time on our final evening and morning was very limited by the long drive back to Marrakech, so we opted instead for the famous Soleil Bleu, saving us 15min drive each way on the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup> and morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>. I booked this over the phone on our return journey to Boumalne a few hours before arrival. We were the only guests at the Soleil Bleu and had the impression it had been opened up for us. It was very convenient for the Tagdilt Track and very friendly though not without fault: the aircon in our room didn't work giving us a hot, sleepless night on 11<sup>th</sup>, and the hotel failed to provide our breakfast at the pre-arranged time of 5.15am. Instead we were forced to stop birding a bit earlier than expected and took breakfast around 8am before heading off for Marrakech. But at 700 Dirham (about 65 euros) in total for dinner, bed and breakfast I thought it was still good value. In Merzouga I had pre-booked Maison Merzouga (booking.com again) for the night of 10<sup>th</sup>, but I rang ahead while en route and they were happy to add the 9<sup>th</sup> as well. At 60 Euros per night (30 each) it was similarly priced to La Perle, however the evening meals, although tasty, were poor value at 16 euros each bringing the effective dinner bed and breakfast price to over 90 euros a night. If I were doing it again I might be tempted to stay at Cafe Yasmina.

## 7<sup>th</sup> July

I met Steve at Gatwick around 11.30. Though our flight was scheduled for 13.05, it was delayed by an hour, so we didn't arrive into Marrakech until 17.40. Picking up bags, car and money from the cash-point (3000D each) took around an hour so it was well beyond 18.30 by the time we finally hit the road with barely two hours of daylight left.

An initially friendly chap who appeared to be something to do with the hire company (who knows?) led us on his scooter via the mad traffic of Marrakech first to a petrol station (contrary to the carhire3000 T&Cs, this was an irritating "return empty" hire), then via some back-streets to a place we could buy lots of bottled water for the trip (12x 2 litre bottles). Finally we followed him to a roundabout where he could point the way to Ouarzazate. We tipped him 100D, an amount we thought generous, but then he insisted on being paid some pounds as well, claiming the 100D would barely cover his fuel. This was clearly nonsense and at this point we became surrounded by a load of kids who'd seen Steve rifling through his newly bulging wallet. As they crowded in I lost patience with scooter man's unreasonable negotiating position, closed the window on his face and floored the accelerator, leaving most of them in the dust, one die-hard clinging on for dear life until he realised I meant business and he too jumped away just in time for me to swerve into a surge of cars bikes and scooters

that appeared to be heading in approximately the right direction.

A modicum of order restored we navigated our way uncertainly around the northern walls of the city before finding the connection road that would take us to the N9. **Woodchat Shrike**, **Common Bulbul** and (presumed African race) **Magpie** were our first and only birds of the 7th.

The drive through the mountains might have been scenic, but it was dark before we had even reached the Tizi'n'Tichka pass. I realised there was no way we would make it to La Perle by 10.30 as hoped (and when they would keep dinner for us) so I rang ahead to warn them of a late arrival and we stopped for a cheap but tasty roadside soup and tagine for 30D each. The rest of the drive was long, tiring and tedious and we finally arrived at Boumalne at 12.30. Finding the hotel was not entirely straightforward in the dark – my first attempt took us along the dry river bed instead of directly across the ford. A **Little Owl** on wires marked the end of the journey as we pulled up outside the closed gates of La Perle du Dades. Fortunately someone was there to greet us and show us our very comfortable room decked out in typical moorish décor. As I carried some stuff in from the car a **Scops Owl** called from the vegetation in the river bed below, and finally at around 1am I was able to crash out in bed.

## 8<sup>th</sup> July

Our alarms had us up at around 5.45 and we were soon on our way for our first encounter with the Tagdilt Track. With the sun soon to rise we made immediately for the track at “km48” (Gosney p19) that joins the main old track after a kilometer or so.



Our first bird – and first lifer – was a **Long-legged Buzzard** sat on a mound of rubbish in the tip, followed soon afterwards by a pair of **Cream-coloured Coursers**. Had I not twitched the Herefordshire golf-course bird in May, these too would have been lifers, but were very welcome nevertheless, A-listers without question.

A group of 4 wheatears near the tip comprised 3 **Red-rumped Wheatear** and a **Desert Wheatear** (both lifers for me), and then our first lark, slightly disappointingly a **Short-toed Lark**. We didn't have long to wait for first lifer larks though. After joining the main track heading SE and driving only a few hundred metres at around 7.10 Steve picked up a pair of smallish, plain larks foraging next to the track. The neatly demarcated bar on the tail told us

we had our first **Bar-tailed Desert Larks** (these were the only ones of the trip), and then more distant his eagle eyes located a small party of **Thick-billed Larks**. The two males and two females gave good views in the scope as they picked their way through the low scrub, running from tussock to tussock, but were too distant for the DSLR and too mobile for my attempts at digiscoping.

As we approached the main wadi we found a pair of **Temminck's Lark** (one adult and one juv), and then on the edge of the wadi a large lark tantalised us but before we could grill it sufficiently it slunk over a ridge never to be seen again. We noted it down as a "possible Calandra".

On the raised area noted in Gosney as "good for Coursers and Hoopoe Lark" we saw more **Red-rumped Wheatear** and then I found a distant party of 4 adult **Cream-coloured Coursers**, before at around 8.30 Steve found our first **Hoopoe Lark**. Large, long-legged but fairly plain apart from its long down-curved hoopoe-like bill, it was in flight that it showed its other Hoopoe-like features with broad black and white bars on the wings. This was a top target for both of us and we spent some time stalking it for better views and photos, eventually successful with the former but not the latter.

Somehow we managed to lose the main track and spent a bit of time going cross-country on minor tracks that became increasingly challenging for our little car. We finally worked out which of the ruined buildings we could see must be "Wheatear Wall" and headed in that direction around a small agricultural holding where we found our first **Trumpeter Finch** (another lifer for me).

Wheatear Wall itself held no wheatears as far as we could see, and is now fenced off, though it was easy enough to slip into the compound. We scored **Thekla Lark** here, more **Trumpeters**, and tantalizingly, I heard our first sandgrouse. I was pretty convinced the call was that of **Crowned Sandgrouse**, but since we never saw one this went down as a tentative "heard only". Instead, when we finally did find sandgrouse it was a party of 11 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and a single **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** (the bubbling, purring calls of the former of course very different from Crowned).



At 10am we started to make our way back to the hotel for breakfast, via the "new" track, the straight, sealed Ikniouen Rd and further encounters with a second **Hoopoe Lark** and more **Temminck's Larks**. As we trundled along the small track that leads across the Dades ford to La Perle for the third time in 12 hours, but for the first time in the light, we stopped to photograph an obliging **Turtle Dove**. The whole valley seemed to be alive with the purring of these attractive doves, now scarce in Britain, but deliciously common almost everywhere we went with any vegetation. At 11am we finally made it back to La Perle du Dades where we showered and tucked into a welcome late breakfast of pancakes, bread, jam, honey and fruit, reflecting on a very successful first morning.

The temperature was now in the high 30s and while Steve wrote up a few notes I had a quick swim and a doze by the pool. Two **Spotted Flycatchers** entertained me with sorties around the garden, then a (lifer) **House Bunting** came down for a drink.

Steve's previous day had started at 5am, driving from Devon to Gatwick then Marrakech to Boumalne – about 10 hours in the car – and I sensed he was initially less than enthusiastic about my new plan of heading off to Merzouga this afternoon. However refreshed by a decent night's sleep, some cracking birding, and a swim, we agreed this was our best plan to reduce the drive on our final day. At 1pm we had settled up with La Perle and were on the road.

Tip offs from Dan Pointon who had birded here only a week or so earlier (see Josh Jones report of that trip at <http://joshjrjones.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/morocco-trip-report-junejuly-2012.html>) had us looking unsuccessfully for a Pharoah Eagle Owl site (we didn't even find the place, let alone the bird), then as we approached a turn-off close to our next tip-off site near Tinghir we slowed and a black and white wheatear bombed across the road in front of us. By the time we had safely pulled to the side and clambered out the bird was long gone. It went down as a presumed White-crowned, but as our first, we wanted better views. In the end this would prove to be a common and photogenic species, especially further east near Merzouga. Very soon afterwards we turned north onto a track and drove up into a canyon



where Dan had reported another target bird, Mourning Wheatear. Several **Trumpeter Finch** showed nicely on cliffs but in spite of a sustained blast from the iPhone we saw and heard nothing in the presumed area of a few bushes. Further up the terrain levelled off but seeing nothing eventually we decided, somewhat despondently, to resume the long journey to the Sahara. Retracing our path back down the steps we stopped below the main cliff to check out view when another black and white wheatear dropped right across the bonnet of the car and landed

about 10m down from us. Bingo -- **Western Mourning Wheatear!** Presumably it had been brought in by the recording some half an hour earlier and was making sure the coast was now clear. Whatever the reason, it now proceeded to pose beautifully for us for the next 15min. Also here we found a pair of plain-looking larks high up on the top of the cliff. These looked good for Desert Lark, and the ID was confirmed after a very short burst on Steve's iPhone and a **Desert Lark** had bombed down from 60-70m away to within feet of us.



As we descended back to the main road I spied another wheatear in a crevice near the road, this time a female **Black Wheatear** (which we initially misidentified as a young White-crowned), and at this same stop we had further views of **Trumpeter Finch**, some **House Buntings**, and I noted a pair of partridge flushed from near the road beating their way down

to a distant invisible part of the canyon. Indisputably these were **Barbary Partridge**, but hardly satisfactory views for a lifer.

The next couple of hours driving east were largely birdless and for the most part uneventful. Sadly the one major event that happened was an encounter with the cops. We had been through various police road blocks to this point, but as we (unknowingly) approached another and tried to pass a slow vehicle ahead of us on a solid white line, we were spotted before we could abort the manoeuvre. In broken French I pleaded innocence and ignorance, they inspected all of our documentation, and to my utter amazement sent us on our way with a warning: the fine would be “sept cent dirhams la prochain fois. C’est pour votre securite”.

At 17.30 about 10km beyond Tinedjad we had our first **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, then in a small town en route to Jorf our first adult **White-crowned Wheatear** and a little while later we stopped again and tracked down a **Rufous Bush Chat**. At 18.30 we were approaching Rissani. Just north of the town we stopped at the Kasbah Ennasra because we had spied another adult **White-crowned Wheatear** and we wanted a shot at some photos. This proved to be a good stop because in the dry fields out the back we found another **Rufous Bush Chat** and a party of several **Fulvous Babblers** as well as brief views of a **Great Grey Shrike**.

Beyond Rissani we made immediately for the Auberge Tresor and the area of desert opposite, noted as good for Egyptian Nightjar in Gosney, arriving at around 1900. The wind had picked up creating a dust-storm, conditions far from ideal for nightjars. Nevertheless we drove the track and walked around until sunset hoping to flush a bird, but really without any conviction or hope. While Steve wandered off south, I followed the trail of a lark north, tracking down a **Long-billed Crested Lark**, my first of this north African race of Crested. At half past eight we admitted defeat and made our way in the dark to Maison Merzouga in Hasilashlibied, a small tourist town set against the dunes (not that we could see them) a few km north of Merzouga. Here we enjoyed a tasty chicken tagine with olives and lemons, but were disappointed that the place was dry. Though Ali the owner offered to accompany us to Merzouga where we could apparently buy some beer, the round trip of some 30-40 minutes discouraged us. Instead we ate our food, reviewed the day, and made do with coke and water, all the while coveting the bottle of red wine being enjoyed by an Australian mother and daughter on the next table. We would rectify this tomorrow.

## 9 July



Our alarms were set for 5am. I made a quick recce outside and ascertained that conditions

were calm again after the evening's high winds, so while it was still dark we headed back north to the area near Auberge Tresor for another crack at nightjars. There was already a distinct glow in the east as we arrived at the track, so an immediate concern was that we had not given ourselves sufficient time. We drove north slowly and immediately flushed a couple of larks from the track, then a hundred metres or so further on another lark and a larger bird flushed. A quick recce on foot failed to relocate it so we drove on, reaching an east-west track which we also drove with headlights on high beam, seeing nothing. We returned to the spot where we may have flushed one earlier, and with the light improving and time running out Steve played a couple of bursts from his iPhone. Whether because of this, or just through good fortune, skill and perseverance, suddenly Steve called out he'd seen a nightjar in flight not far from where we had stopped. I scanned the area and then I too saw the silhouetted



shape of a nightjar flit up and then almost immediately back down to the ground in a shallow wadi. We approached on foot and a cracking **Egyptian Nightjar** burst from the ground in front of us and drifted across the track, landing in a viewable spot, though slightly distant. We took in the view and enjoyed our good fortune before greedily approaching. Again it flushed back to close to where we'd first seen it. As we walked back a **Long-billed Crested Lark** got the pulse racing before once again

Steve's phenomenal eye-sight came to the fore as he found the nightjar now settled under a low scrubby bush and we were able to enjoy crippling views at our leisure.

At 7am, sated with our nightjar experience, and dare I say, even a little bored that it did nothing but sit there, we made a move to the track to Café Yasmina. At the turn-off we had our first **Brown-necked Ravens**, then 5km along this track we stopped and approached the area of grass and low bushes where Dunn's Lark had been seen in spring. We did no serious searching for this elusive species (Dan P had reported no luck in a 4 hours search the week before), but immediately Steve found a **Hoopoe Lark** and started stalking it for decent photos. I wandered a little further afield and within a few minutes had located a cracking **Desert Warbler** that posed beautifully on the top of a bush singing in short bursts. As I was gathering increasingly decent images of this I heard the distinctive disyllabic call of **Spotted Sandgrouse** as Steve almost simultaneously called out they were flying overhead. I looked up and was immediately partially blinded by the bright sky, failing to find the flock.



Increasingly frantically I scanned and finally picked up a single bird at some range as it flew even further away. Steve had seen the flock of 11 before they split into a group of 10 and 1 (the one I saw), but I sensed he too was unhappy with the arse-end views he'd had.

At 8am we carried on the remaining 9km of the track. The view along the track was amazing, our first proper sight of the impressive Erg Chebbi dune system. The low sun cast impressive shadows over the combination of sharp ridges and smooth undulations, the sand a red-gold in the morning light. Occasional palm trees and castle like auberges completed a view that could have been taken from a child's picture-book of a desert.

First stop was Auberge Caravan where we scrutinised all the **House Sparrows** but found no Desert Sparrows. A local offered to take us into the dunes but we declined and decided to try our luck at Café Yasmina.

Here we were directed to talk to a waiter, Hamma, who after finishing up his breakfast duties took us down to the edge of the (now dry) lake to a nest box. Initially there were only more **House Sparrows** here too, but after about half an hour, in which we both wandered around scouting the area, I



returned to the nest box and there next to it was a female **Desert Sparrow**. Further waiting failed to produce a male, so we wandered out a short distance into the dunes to a small area of grass at the base of the biggest dune. There was a well here, but no birds other than about 40 **Brown-necked Ravens**. Though this was a minor sortie, after 15-20 minutes our throats were parched and we were ill-equipped to venture any further, so we retreated to the Café. A familiar cooing transported me subconsciously back to my youth in Perth, and putting two and two together I realised there were **Laughing Doves** here as well as **Collared Doves**. Over a nice breakfast we enjoyed great views of a very tame **White-crowned Wheatear**. Hamma, disappointed for us, suggested a walk into the desert as our best bet for a male, confirming what the Caravan bloke had said, but dawn was really the only time this was practical. It was now far too hot to attempt this.

We made our way back along the bumpy 14km track to the sealed road, and then south



towards our hotel. After a quick text exchange with Ali from Mason Merzouga, we took a diversion to the Merzouga Tourist Complex beyond the end of the sealed road, where we enjoyed a cold Heineken, *Ice Cold in Alex* style, Steve even doing his best John Mills impression: "*Worth waiting for!*" We departed with a stash of 16 bottles, 4 each per evening. Not cheap, but essential.

Back at the hotel in Hasilashlibied we relaxed, had a fairly basic lunch, and

swam and dozed by the pool like middle-aged dudes. The wind had picked up again and we could see dust storms over the dunes. Next to the hotel a small looking tourist shop turned out to be a maze of an emporium, each room leading to another, every one crammed with trinkets, fossils, clothes, rugs, etc. We gave into temptation to buy team turbans and various souvenirs to keep the family sweet back home. After over an hour in the shop at around 4pm we headed out again to do some birding near Rissani before a 6pm rendezvous with Brahim Mezane ([www.birdinginmorocco.jimdo.com](http://www.birdinginmorocco.jimdo.com)), a local guide.

At the bridge west of Rissani we fairly easily found (**Saharan**) **Olivaceous Warbler**, along with another **Rufous Bush Chat**, then spent a fair bit of time trying for decent photos of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** on the Circuite Touristique. As we approached the Shell Garage, our designated rendezvous point, we stopped for photos of an impressive column of around 300 **Brown-necked Ravens** in a thermal.



Brahim was waiting for us and after refueling we headed east to the “usual” Pharaoh Eagle Owl sites, where he also knew of a few other possibilities. Sadly, this was to be the least productive birding with a guide either of us has ever experienced. Conditions were windy and uncomfortable, and in two hours we tried 3 or 4 possible roosts, but saw only a single **Desert Lark**, a **Desert Fox** and a few **Brown-necked Ravens**. Of course this was not his fault at all, and he was pleasant company, a decent birder, and very keen to help us; it was unlucky for him that we had already scored with most of the other species he might have been able to help with. We certainly did not begrudge the fee of 25euros. On the contrary, as eco-tourism enthusiasts, we were very happy to support him in his efforts to promote birding in his local area.

Having given up on owls, as a final roll of the dice we visited an area about 5km further west where Brahim has previously seen sandgrouse regularly, and even Houbara on occasion, but again we dipped. We dropped him back at his home in Rissani where he very kindly invited us in to enjoy a cup of mint tea, before we made our way in the gathering gloom of evening back to our hotel where our beer had been chilling in the hotel fridge all afternoon!

## **10<sup>th</sup> July**

Our plan for the morning was to return to Café Yasmina and walk out into the desert to find some male Desert Sparrows. We arrived pre-dawn at the hotel sought Hamma, who pointed to a camel track heading south-east into the sand and said follow that for 30-40 minutes, find

the camel shit, and they are “guaranteed” . Suitably equipped with suncream and water we trudged out onto the open sand following the footprints of a regular tourist camel train. It was still fairly cool and the scenery spectacular, especially as the sun’s rays burst from highest ridge, conjuring images of dawn on Mars. After about 40mins we could see around the back of the largest, highest dune where an obvious grassy area was next to a small camp. Surely this was the place. Five minutes later we had arrived at a deserted camp at (31.19640,-3.978095). We didn’t have to wait long before a pair of small passerines bombed past us and went deep into the only trees in a 100m radius, a small clump of date palms. Once again we resorted to the iPhone; Steve played a short burst of the sparrow call and within seconds we could hear chattering from the clump and soon after a cracking male **Desert Sparrow** burst from cover and posed nicely, if a little distant for photos, on a post next to the camp. It, and a second, then flew off into the distance, landing on the sand before returning to the cover of the date palm.



Now they had woken up we heard constant chattering from within the palm, but photography in the dense cover was difficult. Eventually a small party made their way to the camp for a drink, a water-butt, then fed on the large area of camel dung where we noted and photographed 3 males and a couple of females and a juvenile. Other birds seen were a pair of **Collared Dove**, a **Great Grey Shrike**, and another adult **White-crowned Wheatear**. By 8am it was exceedingly hot and we had spent more time here than intended. Sweating profusely, we made our way back across the dunes to Yasmina, pausing only for atmospheric photographs of a camel train. An hour and half’s walk in the desert in July may not be every birder’s idea

of fun, but for me this was one of the highlights, for the amazing scenery, for the sight in its natural, and barely hospitable habitat of this small, attractive, enigmatic bird, and for the sheer achievement of it.

We stopped for brief respite at the café, Steve unable to resist the urge to take yet more pics of the confiding **White-crowned Wheatear**. Before bidding goodbye to Café Yasmina we donned our turbans and posed for photos on the dunes, then returned along the bumpy track to the 9km sign where we'd had Desert Warbler yesterday. I hoped for better views of fly-over sandgrouse so I spent a while wandering the area getting some pictures of a couple of **Hoopoe Lark** that skittered around the ground. Steve stayed with the car, uninterested presumably because he'd had better views of the flyover flock. It was quite hot and now gone 10am, so after not too long I decided to bail and joined him back at the car.

Back at the hotel, in keeping with our somewhat relaxed attitude, we took breakfast and had a swim before making a plan for the rest of the day.



Our main objective was to get back to the Tagdilt Track in time for some evening birding. Steve was especially keen of the chance to get pics of Cream-coloured Courser, which we had seen well but failed to photograph 48 hours earlier. En route, I wanted to divert towards Goulmima to the Scrub Warbler site, and so we settled up and left the hotel late morning to allow plenty of time.

About half way along the minor road to that cuts the corner towards Goulmima we stopped at a wadi that held just about the only standing water we saw all trip away from the Barrage del Mansour. This green oasis surrounded by stony desert was productive for **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, **Olivaceous Warbler**, **Rufous Bush Chat**, **Moroccan White Wagtail** (our first) and our first and only **Ruddy Shelduck**.

Travelling on to km43, at around 2pm in the high heat of the day we pulled onto the verge by the bridge as directed by Gosney and searched the area west of the road. It took some searching but after about 15min Steve called and beckoned me over to where he had ended up, near the lone tree some 400m from the road. I turned to make towards him when 4 sandgrouse erupted from the ground no more than 15m in front of me. The characteristic call of **Spotted Sandgrouse** gave immediate identification, but the dark narrow streak on the unders, visible as the banked away from me, was cause for confusion because I had incorrectly remembered this feature as being associated with Crowned. They flew some hundred metres and set down over a ridge to the south.

I joined Steve near the lone tree where he had indeed located a pair of delightful little **Scrub Warblers**. They reminded me of fairy-wrens in Australia with their long, cocked tails and charismatic personalities, as they bounced around as if on little pogo-sticks.

We returned to the car for scopes and now scanned for the sandgrouse from the road,



simultaneously picking up a male but unable to find the other three. We approached on foot, occasionally stopping to take photos, until it finally decided we had come too close and it flew some 50m further away to the next ridge. Time was marching on so we left him in peace and began the long trip to Boumalne, but satisfied with two key species.

We made excellent time and so I dared suggest another slight diversion to Steve, even though I could tell he was champing at

the bit to get back to “the Track”. On our way to Erfoud from Boumalne we’d tried to find a site for Eagle Owl described to me in email from Dan Pointon, but we’d been unable to locate the area he referred to. Now armed with further correspondence from Dan I felt we could give this site justice in less than 30-40min and still have lots of time birding at the track. We stopped just west of Imiter and I ran over the open ground with bins to check we were in the right spot. After 200m or so the gently upward slope fell away steeply to reveal a gorge with cliffs of the far side where Dan and others had had Eagle Owl only a week or two earlier.

I scanned with bins checking out each hole and crevice but could not turn any owl-shapes into a real bird, cursing that I’d failed to bring the scope. Steve waited somewhat skeptically at the car, but when I returned to fetch the scope for a final quick scan he decided to accompany me. Within minutes of returning I had zoomed in on a spot the somehow looked a little different from 10min earlier, as if a creature had shifted position. In the scope I could see what I tried hard to turn into barred tertials but I was still not sure – I would need a new angle. I walked some 20m east towards a cairn and trained again on the spot; there in full view staring straight back at me was a **Pharaoh Eagle Owl**. Vindicated, I now enjoyed great views and tried a few digiscoped pictures.



We made straight for the Soleil Bleu auberge where we dumped our bags, arranged a time for dinner, and -- most importantly -- got the remaining 8 bottles of beer into the fridge, before heading back out the the Tagdilt Track, literally 2 mins drive away. As well as lots of **Red-rumped Wheatear** and more **Temmick’s Larks**, before long we had located a family **Coursers**. Going off road in the car proved to be a good move because it allowed much closer approach; apparently a ton of brightly coloured hot steel and rubber is less of a threat than two blokes on foot. The evening’s mission accomplished, back at the auberge we soaked up the last of the light on the balcony overlooking the town and the Dades valley, and washed down a tasty tagine with our now-

less-than-room-temperature beers.

## 12<sup>th</sup> July

It was ominously quiet and dark in the hotel when we went to find our breakfast at the pre-arranged time of 5.15. We let ourselves out and spent the next 2 hours birding from the Iknouen Rd and around Wheatear Wall again, with highlights 4 **Thick-billed Larks** (again too distant for decent pics), **Hoopoe**, **Trumpeter Finch**, and 13 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**. Next to the now dry pools off the Iknouen Rd a mixed flock of larks contained **Temminck's Lark**, **Hoopoe Lark**, **Short-toed** and **Lesser Short-toed Larks**.

I rang the hotel and rearranged breakfast for 7.45, decent fare, but no word of explanation for the lack of presence at 5.15 was offered. By 8.30 we were on our way back to Marrakech, having allowed plenty of time for the slow drive over the mountains and a buffer in case of issues navigating to the airport which other trip reports had said is poorly signposted.

Although our progress felt slow along seemingly endless single carriageways with no overtaking allowed and a low 70km limit, in fact we made decent time to Ouarzazate and allowed ourselves a brief stop at the Barrage el Mansour from 10-10.30am. Here we quickly clocked up an unspectacular but gratifyingly decent array of wetland birds: **Little Grebe**, **Great-crested Grebe**, **Great Egret**, **Little Egret**, **Grey Heron**, **Squacco Heron**, **Night Heron**, **Coot**, **Mallard**, **Little Ringed Plover**, **Kentish Plover**, **Green Sandpiper**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Gull-billed Tern**, **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, **European Bee-eater**, **Pallid Swift**, **Desert Wheatear**, **Olivaceous Warbler**, **(Moroccan) White Wagtail** **Yellow Wagtail** and **Long-billed Crested Lark**. The star here was **Little Swift**, the two birds here being my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> after Steve and I had twitched the Nottingham bird in 2001.

Hitting the mountains we now had another unwelcome encounter with the law. I was doing 80+ in a 70kmh zone and it was set to be a 500D on the spot fine. In broken French I insisted that cop write out a ticket and miraculously the "fine" was reduced to 200D cash-in-hand, and we were on our way 15 quid lighter.

As we descended on the western side I sensed that Steve had now seen all the targets he thought possible and was now fully focused on getting to the airport. I knew we had a bit of time up our sleeves so I waited until I found some suitable looking habitat and stopped at about 1.30 for a "comfort" break. I later noted this stop down as being 3km east of Tazlida, at about 1360m above sea-level. We were in an attractive, steep-sided valley with a few bushes and other sparse vegetation, denser towards the stream at the bottom which was lined with pink flowering shrubs. It was hot but surprisingly the air was filled with birdsong. A few **Common Bulbul** and **(African) Chaffinch** played in trees above the road, **Serin**, **Linnet** and **Blackbird** sang from below us. Within a minute or two a **Long-legged Buzzard** soared above us and we followed as it cruised to the far side of the valley and landed. I set up my scope and as



I watched the Buzzard a blur of black, white and orange flashed across the view. Surely this had to be my final gettable target of **Moussier's Redstart**, but it was an untickable view. Once again we cranked up the iPod and within minutes a female Moussier's had appeared on rocks next to the road. This gave great views but she is very drab compared to the striking male, so we were now greedy for views of a male which was surely around somewhere. It took a good 20mins more before another bird, this time with big white wing bars bombed down across the road into the cover above the stream. Finally it worked its way back towards us and we now enjoyed great views of the male (and another female, so three birds in total) for about 15 minutes before checking the time and realizing our contingency buffer was almost all gone.



The remainder of the journey was birdless and uneventful, and we managed to navigate our way to the airport using a combination of a crude map, following our noses, and some good fortune.

