

Morocco: Birding & Nature

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



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Fri., Apr. 15 High Atlas Mountains | Fringe of the Sahara Desert

Today we have an amazing journey across the highest pass in the High Atlas Mountains, where the views are spectacular and varied. The northern aspect of the mountain range is influenced by the Atlantic Ocean, hence the vegetation is green and lush, but as we climb the landscape changes and vegetation clings to areas where water passes and becomes sparse on the steep slopes of the multi-colored mountains. Lunch is taken just before the highest point of the mountain pass and here we can relax enjoying a light lunch and birds that visit the surrounding area.

The afternoon drive is downhill, headed towards our first encounter of the fringes for the Sahara Desert, a landscape to take your breath away, especially on a planned excursion to seek difficult bird species such as Maghreb Wheatear and other exotics. A walk near a few palm fringed wadis and a river crossing produces some migrant birds on their way to their European breeding grounds.

We make our way to the gorgeous town of Ouarzazate, the gateway to the Sahara Desert and famous for its movie studios (*Lawrence of Arabia* was filmed here). We aim to arrive at our hotel with time for guests to relax and cleanup before dinner and the run through of our bird checklist.

Hotel Dar Chamaa Ouarzazate or similar (B,L,D)

Sat., Apr. 16 Draa Valley | Erg Chebbi Sand Dunes

Most people think of the Sahara Desert as endless rolling sand dunes, but our journey today bears testimony to the fact that it is anything but. Stone desert interspersed with bare rock mountains, yet where water courses flow above and below ground, green fingers run through the rocky terrain, small oasis form and hold both migrating and resident birds; we visit a few of these areas. After a drink break we pass over the Jbel Saghro Mountains, a mountain range of unique features that form a mosaic of shapes created by the lines of strata. From here we descend into the Draa Valley.

The Draa Valley is a river system that is lined by palmeries and small villages; it is also a main highway for migrant birds arriving from the vast expanse of the unpopulated Sahara Desert. We should find our first Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater here among other exotic migrants, so we need to be in our best “find the bird” mode. From this wonderful valley we head east and make our way to the largest sand dune complex of the Moroccan Sahara, Erg Chebbi. We make this unique area our home for two nights. Glamping for our first, and then we transfer to a hotel for the second night (Note: Our desert camp, not so much camping as glamping, consists of personal large tents with en suite facilities including toilet, wash area and shower, luxury in the Sahara ... and as if that wasn't enough, the food is wonderful and campfire entertainment provides a glimpse into Berber life).

Desert Heart Luxury Camp or similar (B,L,D)

Sun., Apr. 17 Full Day in the Sahara

We spend a day in the desert, traversing the dunes and open areas in our 4x4 vehicles, searching for Egyptian Nightjar, Desert Warbler, Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse, Hoopoe Lark, Cream-colored Courser,



Fulvous Babbler, and Lanner Falcon to name but a few! The scenery is stunning and we really are on an adventure day with birds.

Later in the day we enjoy lunch and then make our way to the sand plains nearby for Pharaoh Eagle Owl and a nesting place for Lanner Falcon. Desert Sparrow is likely to already have been seen at our camp on the first night of our visit. Today is sure to be a day to remember.

By late afternoon we head for our hotel overlooking the amazing high points of the Erg Chebi dune complex; there is a water outfall very near the main entrance to the hotel and here we find many small migrant birds coming to drink and bathe, including the amazing Hoopoe.

Hotel Mohayut Merzouga or similar (B,L,D)

Mon., Apr. 18 Gorges du Dades

We bird outside the hotel for early morning birds, but before that we highly recommend going up to the hotel rooftop bar and terrace, here you can witness the sunrise over the high sand dunes. It is a spectacular and amazing experience. Then, we journey to the high plateau near Boumalne soon after breakfast, making a few birding stops along the way; our aim is to get to our next destination for a late lunch, so we do stop to get a few onboard snacks during this part of the journey.

After lunch we drive through the Gorges du Dades, an amazing deep sided valley with equally amazing geological features. We are sure to stop along the way to take in the scenery and keep our eyes to the sky as we are now in Bonelli's Eagle territory. Our hotel for the next two nights is a favorite, a place to relax and enjoy the superb cuisine and in house entertainment from members of the family who run the hotel. Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush are often seen from the terraces, while Nightingale are singing at the river's edge below our hotel.

Hotel Xaluca Dades or similar (B,L,D)

Tues., Apr. 19 High Plateau Birding

We concentrate our birding efforts today on the high plateau east of Boumalne. Here we search the plains for lark and wheatear species, but the area can also hold surprises such as Stone Curlew and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. We transect the plains, stopping to scan favorable areas and attempt to find the elusive Thick-billed Lark as well as the entertaining Fat Desert Rat.

We take lunch in a family hostel within the plains and hopefully here we might also find Moussier's Redstart and European Bee-Eater. Wheatear species are also a feature in the area and on a good day it is possible to see six species including the very handsome Red-rumped Wheatear. After our lunch we search a couple of green areas, cultivated by local villagers, to look for migrants such as roller and warbler species. Later we pass by our hotel and explore the gorge for more migrant birds, a coffee or mint tea, and admire the



stunning scenery. We also look for Rock Bunting.
Hotel Xaluca Dades or similar (B,L,D)

Wed., Apr. 20 Birding on Return to Ouarzazate

This morning we depart and take a leisurely drive to our next destination, a return to Ouarzazate. The journey provides places where we can stop to seek a few birds and we also pass through the Valley of the Roses, a famous region in Morocco where women's cooperatives harvest rose petals and rosehips to manufacture cosmetics and lotions. If the group wants to view these products we make time for stopping at a cooperative showroom.

We take our lunch at a desert Kasbah near to the town of Skoura, or journey onwards for lunch in Ouarzazate. We arrive in good time at our hotel and guests are free to rest, enjoy the swimming pool, or just relax. If you are keen, you can accompany our guide to explore the shoreline of the nearby lake for some water birds including Greater Flamingo.

Hotel Dar Chamaa Ouarzazate or similar (B,L,D)

Thurs., Apr. 21 Birding River & Desert Areas

Our road trip today takes us back to Marrakech and over the high pass of Tizi N'Tichka. En route we explore the river areas near to Amerzgane and also the desert area around Tizgzaouine for later migrants such as Ortolan Bunting, Whinchat, Rufous Bush Robin, and also desert birds like Trumpeter Finch, Desert Lark, and wheatear species. The area is breathtaking with desert scenes that have a backdrop of snowcapped mountains, forming a landscape unique to our journey.

We again take lunch at the high point of the mountain crossing and here we might explore the local surrounds for Common Rock Thrush and Rock Sparrow. The descending journey provides opportunities for us to stop and find more birds and depending on time, we break to enjoy a mint tea on a café terrace overlooking some amazing tree lined valleys. By late afternoon we arrive at our garden riad for a two-night stay; here the accommodations are rustic, clean, and comfortable with tranquil gardens and large swimming pool—the homemade food is possibly our most favorite on the tour. Last spring, Rufous Bush Robin had taken up residence in this garden!

Hotel Riad Bladna Chez Mohamed or similar (B,L,D)

Fri., Apr. 22 Oukaïmeden

After birding the hotel gardens before breakfast we head up high into the High Atlas Mountains to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden. A real departure from our desert experience, we look for high mountain species such as Horned Lark, Crimson-winged Finch, Seebohm Wheatear, Alpine Chough, and Red-billed Chough; we also hope for good views of Barbary Falcon and Moussier's Redstart. Dipper and Common Rock Thrush might also be seen here. Our previous visits and success at finding these key birds has ranged from very easy to difficult—much depends on the weather, so all things crossed the weather is kind and we have no difficulties finding our birds.

